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Another Step Forward

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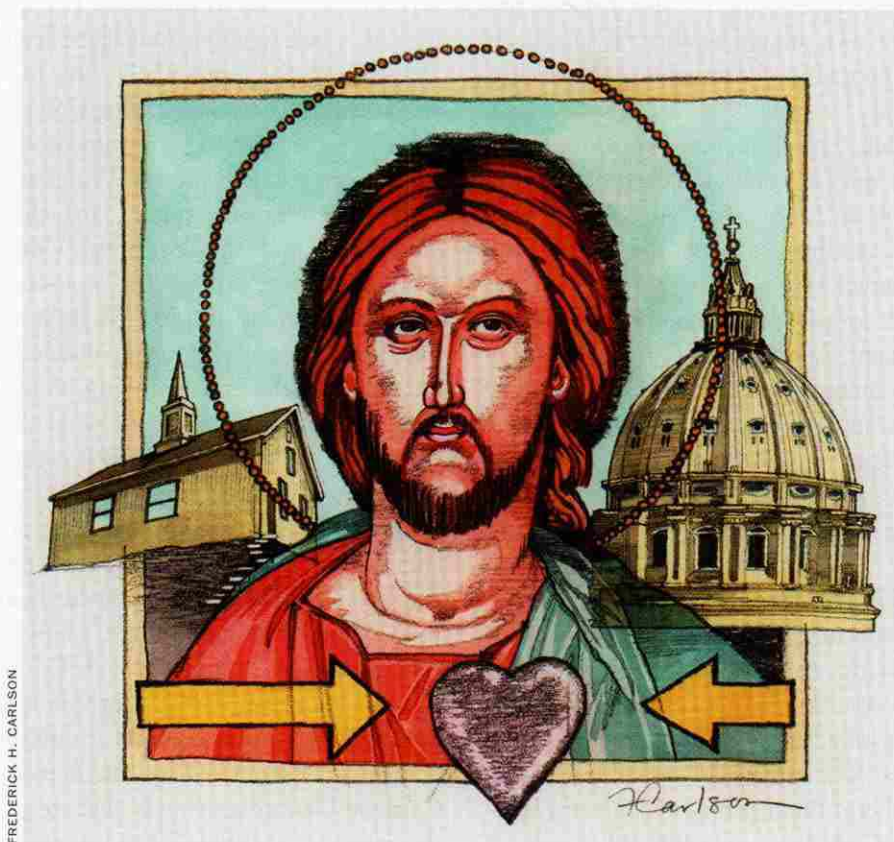
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Catholics and Evangelicals take a new look at each other.

Another Step Forward

— BY THOMAS P. RAUSCH —

ONE OF THE MOST HEARTENING ASPECTS of the ecumenical movement today is the growing relationship between Catholics and Evangelicals. Their history had long been marked by disparagement and rejection. In 1873 the Evangelical Alliance in the United States said its greatest foe was not atheism, but the “nominally Christian Church of Rome.” In more recent times, perhaps the low point was Loraine Boettner’s 1962 work, *Roman Catholicism*, a popular critique of Catholicism, notable for its many errors of both historical fact and theology. Such attitudes were still evident two years ago when R. Albert Mohler, president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in

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Lexington, Ky., said on "Larry King Live" that the Catholic Church was "a false church" teaching a "false gospel." But Catholics have had their own prejudices about Evangelicals and have frequently been guilty of stereotyping them without really knowing them.

The last three decades, however, have seen numerous examples of Catholics and Evangelicals taking a new and more appreciative look at each other. An international Pentecostal-Roman Catholic dialogue, begun by the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity in 1972, completed its fourth quinquennium of study in 1997 with the statement *Evangelization, Proselytism and Common Witness*, a document that addresses a particularly sensitive issue. A second consultation, the Evangelical-Roman Catholic Dialogue on Mission, was established in 1977. A third, between the Catholic Church and the World Evangelical Fellowship (now Alliance), has been meeting since 1993.

Though very significant, these international dialogues are not well known except to professional ecumenists. But the encounter between the two traditions became front-page news in 1994 as a result of Evangelicals and Catholics Together, an initiative of Charles Colson and the Rev. Richard John Neuhaus. Though it had no official status, E.C.T. brought a number of high-profile Evangelical leaders into dialogue with Catholics—men like Bill Bright of Campus Crusade for Christ, Mark Noll of Wheaton College, and J. I. Packer of Regent College in Vancouver, British Columbia. Their participation shocked some Evangelicals; two Southern Baptist signers later had to withdraw their names, lest they be seen as speaking for the Southern Baptist Convention.

But what is perhaps even more significant than those official dialogues is that Catholics and Evangelicals are beginning to discover at the grass-roots level how much they have in common and how much they can learn from each other. This was clearly evident at a conference that took place on April 11-13 of this year at Wheaton College in Illinois. Wheaton, often referred to as an Evangelical Stanford, is an educational institution with roots in the abolitionist movement, an engagement with institutional injustice of which Evangelicals are rightly proud. The conference, held in Barrows Auditorium in the Billy Graham Center, was an excellent event. It had been well conceived and organized, and it drew an enthusiastic group of approximately 400 people, some from distant parts of the country.

The first two speakers, William Shea of St. Louis University and Mark Noll of Wheaton, reviewed the pertinent history. Professor Shea noted that the Second Vatican Council represented a rejection of the concept of Christendom by the Catholic Church, while the council's affirmation of religious liberty defused one of

Evangelicalism's greatest fears about Rome. Professor Noll reviewed the ways in which the two traditions were beginning to work together and learn from each other. Susan Wood from St. John's University in Collegeville, Minn., and J. Daryl Charles of Taylor University in Upland, Ind., addressed the doctrine of justification, the issue that began the Reformation. Professor Wood stressed that the 1999 Joint Declaration, signed by the Lutheran World Federation and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, expressed a "consensus in basic truths of the doctrine of justification," in light of which "the remaining differences of language, theological elaboration and emphasis" in the understanding of justification are acceptable. That consensus should rebut the charge, still heard today from some conservative Protestants, that Catholics do not accept justification by faith.

Other talks focused on the locus of authority, Scripture and tradition and evangelizing the culture. James I. Packer, who is an icon for many Evangelicals, and the Rev. Richard John Neuhaus, editor of *First Things*, both gave personal retrospectives on the 1994 E.C.T. conversation. The keynote addresses at this Wheaton conference were given by Cardinal Francis George, Archbishop of Chicago, and Timothy George, Dean of Beeson Divinity School. Cardinal George graciously fielded questions from among the more than 1,000 Wheaton students and guests who were present for his talk. He also gave a moving response when Wheaton's president, Dr. Duane Litfin, who was chairing that session, raised the issue of the current scandal of sexual abuse by clergy, a topic that was on everyone's mind.

The participants were almost universally enthusiastic about the conference. For me, a number of things stood out as indicators of how far Catholics and Evangelicals have come in their relations with each other. First, it was significant that the conference, sponsored by the Department of Bible and Theology at Wheaton and by InterVarsity Press, represents an important involvement with Catholics by Evangelical institutions, not just individual representatives. In the international dialogues, some of the Evangelical and Pentecostal participants, lacking institutional support from their communities, have had to participate at their own expense. At least one of them, a fine scholar and ecumenist, has frequently been threatened with dis-fellowship by his denomination for his ecumenical work with Catholics. In the United States, Evangelical and Pentecostal churches and associations have not been willing to enter into dialogue with the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, with the exception of the Southern Baptism Convention, which unilaterally ended the conversation last year.

The conversation at Wheaton was also theologically

substantive. One of the most useful exchanges, in my view, came in response to Gerald Bray's talk on authority. Professor Bray had stressed the evangelical "born again" experience as the essential spiritual experience linking Evangelicals across denominations. Though he had made it clear that for many this experience came in different, often hidden and non-dramatic forms, a woman asked him during the question period if the experience wasn't, after all, just a subjective "feeling." In his response, Professor Bray emphasized his point that this experience is far more one of conversion, decision and commitment. That was good news for at least this writer. It means that once the "born again" experience is disentangled from the interpretative rhetoric of a particular religious culture, it becomes apparent that millions of Catholics can claim a similar experience. It is also an example of how Catholics and Evangelicals can learn to appreciate each other's often different theological languages.

One young woman, presumably Catholic, asked about the Catholic Church's inability to ordain women. A panelist in response suggested that the Catholic tradition continues to struggle with this issue, but then pointed out that the conference's Catholic team, unlike the Evangelical team, included two women participants, both distinguished theologians, who between them represent their church at the highest level of ecumenical work as members of five national or international ecumenical dialogues. The audience broke into applause.

In an otherwise irenic talk, Dr. James Packer pointed to some Catholic "eccentricities"—the authority of the church, infallibility, Mary, merit, transubstantiation, the Eucharist as sacrifice. But Evangelicals have eccentricities of their own—for example, the nonbiblical doctrine of biblical inerrancy, the doctrine of the certainty of salvation ("once saved, always saved") and that peculiar Evangelical tendency to spiritualize visible, historical realities (the visibility of the church universal, communion, the marks of the church) and literalize metaphors (Christ's sacrifice as a transaction, the truth or trustworthiness of Scripture, predestination).

Most impressive was the good will of all those present: speakers, participants and hosts. The atmosphere was gracious, open and warm. People mingled and mixed, and new friendships were formed. The dialogue between speakers and participants, both after the talks and outside the conference hall, was perhaps the best part of the conference. Questions were probing, but generally friendly. Perhaps the only exceptions were the questions raised by a number of former Catholics who still had issues with their former ecclesial home. One had clearly been hurt. Another waged a relentless campaign against Catholic teaching and was last seen interviewing students in the dining hall and asking

if Wheaton professors taught (properly in the questioner's view) that Catholics have to be evangelized in order to be saved.

IT BECAME INCREASINGLY EVIDENT that Catholics and Evangelicals are already working together in many places. In San Diego, for example, InterVarsity Fellowship and a Catholic campus ministry are cooperating in evangelizing students. John Green, a Catholic who has two degrees from Wheaton, has begun Emmaus Ministries, a service that brings Catholics and Protestants together in an effort to reach out to men involved in prostitution, who in many cases have been sexually exploited themselves. Mr. Green is to be ordained a deacon. One Catholic youth minister in a parish not far from Willow Creek Community Church in South Barrington, Ill., perhaps the most successful "seeker church" in the United States—it claims that 70 percent of its members are former Roman Catholics—asked how his group could reach out to alienated Catholics. Someone suggested: "Find a Catholic-friendly Evangelical for your staff!" Wheaton College, whose Statement of Faith precludes welcoming Catholics to its faculty or professional staff, may itself be showing some signs of moving in a more open direction.

There are still significant theological issues separating the two traditions, and considerable hostility remains in Latin America. But Catholics and Evangelicals have much in common. They share far more than a narrow concern for "family values," for the right to life and the "co-belligerency in the culture wars" that seems to characterize the interests of some Catholic and Evangelical gatherings. Both take theology seriously and are committed to the central doctrines of the Trinity, the Incarnation, the salvific life and death of Jesus and his bodily resurrection. Both are concerned with a personally appropriated faith—Catholics through their emphasis on spirituality and Evangelicals through their stress on a personal relationship with Jesus. And both groups are committed to the church's evangelical mission, particularly as it has been articulated by Pope John Paul II, with his emphasis on a "new evangelization" and his insistence in his 1992 encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* that the "kingdom of God is not a concept, a doctrine or a program subject to free interpretation, but before all else a person with the face and the name of Jesus of Nazareth." Indeed, Pope John Paul II talks about evangelization in a language that many Evangelicals understand.

At the end of the conference, the participants gathered for a "Closing Worship." They joined in prayer and response without any awkwardness or hesitation in a service that from a Catholic perspective seemed a combination of elements from the Liturgy of the Hours and the Mass's Liturgy of the Word. It was good to pray together. We should do it more often. **A**